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alas! for the purpose of determining the truth! However we may strain after the virtue of controversial *fairness*, we are really only defending ourselves. And how quick we are to fly to the rescue of our attitudes! How much time is wasted in every public meeting in explaining "Where I stand"!

From this rationalizing tendency only physical science escapes—if, indeed, it does escape, which Veblen doubts. In all other branches of knowledge "rationalizing" is more or less rampant, and it makes the formation of a true public opinion almost infinitely slow.

In expressing and applying these fundamental ideas, Mr. Robinson has achieved a breadth and clearness not common. One has to turn to some such writer as Wells or Graham Wallas to find the like of it. But Mr. Robinson is simpler than Wells or Graham Wallas, and does not implicate us in social theories. The only serious criticism one can make upon his work is that the latter part of the book is rather too simply a sort of tirade against the conservative, against the one Wells has called "the unteachable, the 'old fool'." True, Mr. Robinson is not guilty of being dogmatic himself. Very frankly he says: "The so-called 'radical' is almost always wrong, for no one can foresee the future." Yet the conservative is "fatally wrong"; it is against him that the attack has to be chiefly directed, and there is little recognition of the possibility that his instincts may have their uses. There is no misrepresentation here—though perhaps there is an omission, or at least a certain failure of catholicity. It is all a question of stress and proportion.

THE TOWER OF OBLIVION. By Oliver Onions. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Mr. Onions's real difficulty, one would say, is in his subject: granting his theme, one has to admit his rather extraordinary art. He has told his story in the only way in which it could be told; he has invested it with all the reality and all the feeling it perhaps admits of. He has deftly chosen his point of view; he has skillfully varied his method of narration; he unobtrusively and just in the nick of time exposes the thoughts of minds other than that of the supposed narrator, so that we see *their* minds at work. He, moreover, invokes youth, beauty, and humor to aid him. But all will not do! The *idea* of the story is alluring, but it refuses to become interesting. And this is a pity, for one can see that the tale had to be written. There is, after all, a haunting suggestion of possible human experience in its very idea.

Who has not had in some degree the experience of going mentally backward? One is suddenly disillusioned with the present, let us say, and, aided by some recurrence of old circumstances—finding oneself, perhaps, doing the very same thing as on a previous occasion—one is possessed by an old mood. To all intents and purposes, one *is*, for the time being, the man or woman of

ten or twenty years before! This is all a matter of mood, of course; but moods may be dismissed too lightly.

Now suppose that, instead of merely experiencing this more or less common retrogression of mood, a man actually began to *live* backward—to “grow” from forty-five toward sixteen! The *prompting* might be much the same as in the simpler case—extreme disillusionment, a too near approach to Heaven or Hell, and then the recurrence of old memories and an old situation. Would not such a man be well within the pale of our sympathy and understanding? Ought not his case to be supremely interesting?

It ought to be, but it isn't.

The trouble is that the idea of the story cannot, with utmost skill, be made to reveal itself, little by little, through an orderly and natural process, in terms of human experience. Obstinate and uncompromisingly, it calls for *explanation*. It has to be allowed to stand out, and when it is once detached from obscurity, nothing else has a chance. As a result, the story takes as much exposition as a discourse on the Black Art, or an essay on the Rosicrucians, or the literature of our friends the Theosophists. One does not mean to imply that Mr. Onions has had recourse to these or any other myths: simply, his theme is similarly refractory to the touch of literary art.

Derwent Rose, the novelist, who undergoes the reversal of life, is in many ways rather a human figure. But we forget his humanity in trying to grasp his predicament. His friend, the supposed narrator, tries to give dramatic value to his analysis by shrinking in (more or less factitious) horror from the sheer crudity of the explanations themselves. It is a good trick, but it does not altogether work. It is of no avail that Mr. Onions writes poetically of Dinan and the French countryside and of young love. It is to comparatively little purpose that he most artfully invests the newly youthful Derwent Rose with an angelic grace compounded of youth and age. It is with only moderate success that he reveals to us the strange emotional state of Julia Oliphant, who has loved “Derry” since both were children and now hopes by all manner of wiles to capture him on his way back to infancy—a strong theme this; but the idea, with its insistent demand for definition, will not let it grow. The idea eats up the story.

One has only to compare this novel with a masterpiece like Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* to perceive the difference in the workability of the two themes. James's story tells itself without strain from the best available point of view, that of the governess of the two possessed children. Mr. Onions continually feels the inadequacy of the point of view he has adopted and makes his supposed narrator more and more futile as a human being in an endeavor to compensate for the other lack. James's figures are shadowy, yet they lay hold on our sympathies. Mr. Onions's characters are presented with almost burdensome fulness, yet they never become quite real to us. It could hardly be otherwise. Thus, one's dominant emotion in reading the story is sympathy for Mr. Onions in his forlorn attempt.